Section 18  if

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language notes

Students’ grammars often give the impression that there are three main types of conditional sentence (so-called ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’). While these structures certainly need special attention, the analysis is seriously misleading. Students who have been taught this are likely to be confused when they run across the many other kinds of structure that are possible in sentences with if (see the examples on this page). More accurately, there are two types of structure in sentences with if:

1. Normal tense use, as with most other conjunctions (including the use of present tenses to refer to the future in subordinate clauses)
2. The use of ‘backshift’, where past and past perfect forms express unreality rather than time (this happens in some other kinds of sentence besides conditionals, too).

The details of this are not important at this level, but we think it’s best to avoid talking about ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ conditionals.

German wenn can mean ‘if’, which can lead to mistakes.

*When I was you, I wouldn’t do it like that.

possible further activities

Quotations  The purpose of the quotations is simply to provide students with some interesting examples of the use of if – there’s no need for them to do anything besides reading them, perhaps with a dictionary. But you might invite them to search the internet for more interesting quotations or song titles using if.

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language notes

Unless cannot always be used in the same contexts as ‘if … not’ – it would be odd to say ‘I’ll be surprised unless she passes her exam’. ‘Except if’ is a more exact equivalent of unless.

possible further activities

Personalisation  Students write sentences about themselves, completing some or all of the following:

- If I’m bored, I …
- If I’m depressed, I …
- If I have a free weekend, I …
- If I need help, I …

Inventing regulations  Students (perhaps in groups) write regulations for the classroom, beginning ‘You can’t come in here unless …’.
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**language notes**

In some students’ languages, future tenses may be normal after the equivalent of *if*:

*She will study next year if she will have enough money.*

**possible further activities**

**If-chains: extending Exercise 3** A difficult exercise, but worth trying with good students: start with a sentence about the future beginning ‘I think …’ – for example, ‘I think it will rain tomorrow’. Get the class to suggest continuations with *if*, like this:

‘If it rains, I’ll stay at home.’ ‘If it rains, I’ll dance in the garden.’ etc

Choose a suggestion and invite continuations:

‘If I dance in the garden, my neighbours will call the police.’ ‘If I dance in the garden, I’ll get wet.’ etc

Choose another suggestion, and go on to build up a big *if*-chain like the one in Exercise 3.

**OR:** Give every student an opening sentence about the future beginning ‘I think …’. Each student writes the first link in the chain and passes the paper to the next student until all the papers have gone round the class. Collect the chains and read them out, or get students to read them out.

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**language notes**

Some students will take time to understand that past tenses can be used not only to refer to past time, but also to express unreality, indefiniteness, hesitancy etc.

**possible further activities**

‘*If we had some bacon …*’ There is an old army joke that goes ‘If we had some bacon, we could have bacon and eggs, if we had some eggs’. Explain this use of *could* to mean ‘would be able to’, and invite the class to write down one or two variations of the joke (or of another example if bacon is culturally unacceptable). Possible combinations: bread and butter, chicken and chips, coffee and biscuits, strawberries and cream.

**Putting things right** Invite students to complete the sentence ‘If …, the world would be a better place.’

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**language notes**

The use of first-person *were* after *if* is becoming less common (like other old subjunctives), but it is still alive and well in the expression *If I were you*.

**possible further activities**

**Advice for the teacher** Tell the class that you have various problems, and ask for advice (written or spoken), beginning ‘If I were you …’. Help with vocabulary as necessary.

‘I’m lonely.’ ‘If I were you, I’d join a club.’


➔ Section 18 continues
possible further activities

Internet  Get students to decide which of the following they think are most common.

'If cats are people.' / 'If cats were people.'
'If horses can speak.' / 'If horses could speak.'
'If dogs understand.' / 'If dogs understood.'

Then get them to check their estimates on the internet.

possible further activities

Personalisation  Ask students to write about a turning point in their lives, completing one of these sentences:

If I had(n't) ..., everything would have been different.
If I had(n't) ..., I would(n't) have ...
If ..., hadn't ..., I would(n't) be ... today.

Story  In a higher-level class, invite students to write a very short story beginning ‘If I hadn’t answered the phone …’. Help with vocabulary as necessary.

Internet  Get students to find two or three interesting sentences on the internet beginning ‘If we hadn’t …’.